

Chapter 6

Improving Health and Efficiency With Strategic Social Media Use in Health Organizations: A Critical Review of the Status Quo

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of social networking systems as mainstream applications and an inherent element of daily life is a phenomenon observed throughout the world as the worldwide social media users exceeds 2.7 billion. Similar to other sectors, healthcare organizations have also started benefiting from social media in distinct ways such as collecting feedback, educating, communicating and supporting patients and citizens. Social networks can act as remarkable channels for healthcare providers, governmental institutions, pharmaceutical companies, hospitals and others to educate, communicate to, listen, connect to and engage existing and potential customers, patients, physicians and healthcare professionals. Despite the various benefits offered, health institutions, health professionals and stakeholders are reluctant to utilize social media due to several barriers and lack of expertise. This chapter aims to provide a better understanding on the ways healthcare companies can utilize social networks in detail to overcome use barriers and obtain related benefits.

INTRODUCTION

Currently the Internet has become an important and integral part of daily life throughout the world. In line with decreasing cost of communication and rapidly growing population with access to the Internet, new opportunities have arisen, new economies have been devised and current ones have been transformed. Even small-sized organizations now have the ability to directly reach millions of individual citizens and potential customers. This ability to reach millions was only available through the use of intermediaries

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and was commonly a unique capability of larger, well-established institutions (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009). The developments in the last decade regarding enabling technologies such as the Internet, communication technologies, Web 2.0 and social networking sites (SNS) have transformed the daily lives of billions of consumers and companies alike. Among the most significant developments, the emergence of SNS as mainstream applications is a phenomenon observed not only in developed countries but also globally. The estimated number of global users of social media have exceeded 2.7 billion in 2018 and is expected to reach to 2.95 billion in 2020 (Clement, 2018). On the other hand, the increase in number of people interacting with each other and companies and creating content themselves have led to an exponential increase of data available to institutions and consumers. It has become particularly difficult to process and evaluate all the data available to individuals and organizations alike to acquire relevant information. Web 2.0 technologies have been diffusing to the healthcare arena as well. Social media use in healthcare is becoming a significant issue in a variety of ways. Effective use of SNS can enable cost-effective healthcare professional (physician) - patient communication and exchange of relevant information and experience among patients. Moreover, it is possible for companies (e.g. pharmaceutical) to collect data from patients to explore new medical knowledge or confirm existing knowledge. Moreover, epidemic trend detection and education of citizens are promising areas that governmental bodies and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) can utilize via social networks to improve and sustain public health.

Despite all the benefits offered, health institutions, professionals and stakeholders are reluctant to utilize social media fully. There are several barriers and lack of expertise in the healthcare industry on effective social media use. This chapter aims to highlight the distinct ways social networking sites can be utilized to benefit all stakeholders of healthcare industry. The barriers that are hindering wider adoption of social media in healthcare organizations and recommendations for relevant healthcare institutions, professionals and governmental bodies are provided in the following pages of this chapter.

BACKGROUND

Origin of Health 2.0: From Web 1.0 to Web 2.0

It is argued that the most successful period for technology companies was experienced after 2001. This coincides with the emergence of Web 2.0, whose most important aspect is the interaction capability provided to users. Individuals can conveniently interact and communicate with the companies and other users and through the content everyone create. Web 2.0 offers not a read-only system that users access to get informed but an editable platform that can be used in distinct ways by users. Unlike its predecessor, Web 2.0 facilitates the interaction between users and websites, and provides an abundance of interactivity, participation, and sharing. Countless successful enterprises such as YouTube, Facebook and Skype emerged after 2001 and benefited from Web 2.0 technologies. Furthermore, the general social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Twitter that are positioned to reap the benefits offered by Web 2.0 have also emerged during this period. Before furthering the discussion it is best to define the social networks as “a group of internet-based applications that were built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow creation and exchange of user generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

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